



## Does the emergence of community libraries herald the demise of the public library network? CILIP Umbrella Event 2013

Sue Charteris:

My answer to the question is, not if, if...care is taken over a number of fundamentals. I worked with Locality on the research 'Community Libraries: Learning from Experience', commissioned by the Arts Council. We took a snapshot in July 2012 and the position was a very confused one, different Council's were using the term community library in different ways, in some places there was an attitude of 'you take them on or lose them' in others a real partnership was developing between councils and community providers.

AnneMarie will describe the picture we found and the typology we established. We also developed some guidelines and working principles, issues we felt councils should consider at the outset.

I think this boils down to six vital considerations. These are:

- What outcomes do we want our libraries to support? (What are they for?)
- What does our (statutory) network need to look like in these financially constrained times?
- What roles might communities be willing to play in delivering the network and how do we best ask them?
- Are there any parts of our offer that we can no longer justify? (And if so be clear about this at the outset)
- How do we build a constructive relationship with communities (and staff) to both build and sustain this new approach? It won't just happen.
- What partners have we got inside and outside the council to help us?

So the issues facing community- led delivery are not so very different to how the network itself stays strong through the recession and changing nature of demand. Community led provision (community libraries) can be part of the solution but the key issues are:

- Sustainability: are CM libraries relying on council grant and volunteers or are they becoming social businesses with new sources of income?
- Stretch: There are additional and different resources needed to support this approach. How are professional resources being spread across the network, to support those community- managed libraries in new ways?

- Equity: Addressing the inbuilt risks of inequality (i.e. that communities in most need of a public library service might not be served well without additional input to support).

So what does this mean for library professionals? I think the tacit messages are:

- Keep an open mind: not assuming that many will come forward to support the library's existence or that none will:
- Develop a strategic and enabling approach to professional support
- Explain how you are supporting this new approach, generating evidence for your professional enabling role to be better understood
- Work with other services and agencies to support the growth of the model, more to lose than to gain

Finally, build a professional partnership with those in communities based on mutual respect. I know it's a really tough ask but avoid being stereotyped into justifying the status quo. The spread of professional resources across the public library network has clearly been a major challenge for some time. Instead explain and advocate for a mixed approach that can only work with your support.

Sue Charteris at Cilip July 2013